

Winter Risks: This is the Season to be Jolly and Careful

Written by Dr. Ramin Manshadi M.D

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In some ways, people are more mindful of their general health during the cold weather seasons. They may get Flu shots. They make sure their hair is dry after washing before venturing outside. They buy winter coats. They don't realize they also need to “bundle up” against heart attacks. Why? There are more heart attacks during winter than any other season. Comprehending why, will also help you understand more about your body. In cold weather, there is more oxygen demand by the heart because it is working harder to do the work and maintain body heat. Each 1.8 degree Fahrenheit reduction in temperature on a single day was linked to about 200 additional heart attacks.

A report in the Dec. 13, 2004, issue of *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association* found that the rate of cardiovascular-related deaths rose sharply between Dec. 25 and Jan. 7. The greatest risk came within two weeks of cold-weather exposure, and those aged 75-84, along with those with coronary heart disease, were most vulnerable to the temperature changes. Your body has intriguing response mechanism to deal with cold. The goal is to keep the core of your body at 98.6 degrees. One of the ways your body does this is by constricting

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blood vessels to limit the loss of body heat. This does help, but it also raises blood pressure and lowers the amount of blood flowing to your heart and other organs. If you are being active at the same time, this can put a significant demand on your heart. If you already have heart disease, it may be too much and cause a heart attack. That's why you hear warnings about the high risks of coronary while shoveling snow.

Another factor that can increase the risk of heart attack during the winter season is the potential of contracting flu . We know that inflammation can trigger a heart attack and the flu inflammation. In turn, inflammation can make arterial plaque less stable, and they may dislodge, block arteries, and contribute to a heart attack. But a flu shot can lower the risk of heart attack. People at high risk for the flu, including people older than 65 and those with Cardiovascular risk factors, should make sure to get the shot.

So how might you protect yourself? For shoveling snow you can hire others (hopefully those at less risk) to do it for you. Yes there's cost involved, but certainly minor compared to chancing a heart attack. If you do go outside, make doubly sure you are warmly clothed, so your blood vessels have less of a tendency to contract in order to preserve heat. Cover your head and hands; all that you can. If you are shoveling, don't try to do too much at one time; take breaks frequently. Remember snow is heavy. Not so much when hurling a snowball, but much more when shoveling. Also, be sure to stretch and warm up your body before going out, so your activity puts less strain on you.

When you are shoveling, be alert. Symptoms of a heart attack can seem similar to a pulled muscle, including squeezing or other pains in your chest area, or pain in your arms, back or neck. They can also include shortness of breath, sweating or nausea. Pay extra attention to any warning signs after shoveling too. If you feel chest pain, always take an aspirin immediately as this can dramatically decrease chances of dying from a heart attack. Any size aspirin will do, though if there is an acute sign of heart attack, it is the best to chew 325 mg of aspirin (a full strength aspirin). Enjoy your winter holiday season and be safe.

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Board-Certified physician with the American Board of Interventional Cardiology, American Board of Cardiology. He combines private practice with Academic Medicine. Presently, he serves as Associate Clinical Professor at UC Davis Medical Center and as Clinical Professor at University of the Pacific among other positions. In addition, he is the Chair of Media Relations for American College of Cardiology, California Chapter. The multi-faceted physician is licensed and certified in nuclear medicine, a subspecialty of radiology. In this regard, he is a member of the American Board of Nuclear Cardiology. It is noteworthy to mention that in his practice, he likes to use innovative tests. If you want to know more about Dr. Manshadi, you can click here.

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